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DANCER LI MOVES FLUIDLY TO OTHERS' BEATS

Karyn Saemann Correspondent for The Capital Times May 10, 2009

Take an artist out of their element, they may flail.

Madison audiences are used to University of Wisconsin dance professor Li Chiao-Ping choreographing for herself and her company. On Saturday night, with the help of seven immensely talented, internationally known female choreographers, Li put on her performer's hat and tried someone else's moves.

They fit beautifully -- albeit differently.

"Women Dancing: the changing faces of the women of American modern dance," offered seven world-premiere pieces, one each from choreographers Cynthia Adams, Molissa Fenley, Heidi Latsky, Elizabeth Streb, Bebe Miller, Victoria Marks and June Watanabe. One piece, "A Dance Should Have Trees In It," was a choreographic collaboration between Marks and Li.

The two-hour, one-night-only concert drew a small, yet wonderfully supportive audience to the Wisconsin Union Theater.

"A Dance Should Have Trees In It" aside, the movement in all of the pieces was a palpable deviation from Li's typical round-edged, unbounded athleticism.

"Camber," choreographed by Fenley, was quick and clean with defined pauses between moves that lent a staccato feel.

"Processing," choreographed by Heidi Latsky, alternated early on between slow and suddenly bold, energetic movement. Then things intensified, backed by what sounded like someone searching for a radio station, with lots of static interspersed by an occasional audible signal. Then things went into overdrive with frantic, chaotic moves, Li whipping her long loose hair to unsettled music, collapsing in feigned exhaustion on the floor and finally rising finish out the piece.

In "Board," Li's partner was a thin spinning board suspended from above on a wire. As it whirled around, she dove under it, ran in and out and through its space, laid down and then sat up repeatedly, and moved in various other interesting ways, all without being hit. With no background music, "Board" was all about self-timing.

"Watching Watching," choreographed by Bebe Miller, used technology that Li has performed with before in Madison. At times Li appeared to be dancing in synch with an on-screen image of herself. Other times, the video Li and the live Li countered each other with their own individual moves.

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It was not clear whether the video portion was taped ahead of time and the appearance of synchronization was simply part of the melding with the live choreography; or if computer technology was making it possible to instantly beam an image of the performer onto a screen, with the ability to sometimes insert different video. It was mesmerizing regardless of how it was done.

"A Dance Should Have Trees In It" was backed by audio of a soldier describing the 2003 invasion of Iraq. After beginning the piece in a sort of pretzeled headstand, Li made simple body and arm motions to signify many different things -- keeping things under control, being patriotic, praying for a soldier and a child, a young son's superhero pose. Then, as the invasion began, came fear, translated into fast, frenzied moves.

Finally, "Mendelssohn Piece" was gentle and understated, with Li in a swinging shorter-skirted dress, sometimes remaining for stretches in one corner of the stage, other times lightly running, leaping. Like most of the other pieces presented Saturday night, "Mendelssohn Piece" was backed by stretches of no music, alternating with classic and original scores.

Li proved once again she is one of Madison's performing arts treasures. She rose to the call of a different beat, showing she can diversify and follow someone else's choreographic lead.



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